



"Being conversant on the CCS and other sets of standards is a central role teacher-librarians can have."

# The Common Core Standards: Opportunities for Teacher-librarians to Move to the Center of Teaching and Learning

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**T**he nature of education is changing and so is the work of the teacher-librarian. We are being asked to use standards to improve how we instruct students.

We are being asked to have better assessments that inform our practice. We are being asked to improve instruction, to forge stronger relationships with research so we are always informed as to the best practices and knowledge about student learning, and we are asked to lead and embrace a vision of student learning unlike anything we ever experienced.

We are not the only ones interested in the outcome of the educational experience—everyone is involved. And everyone has a stake in making it successful.

In this brief overview of the Common Core Standards (CCS), our purpose is to highlight major ideas and themes in the documents as an introduction for teacher-librarians who want to move into the center of teaching and learning as an indispensable participant.

## HISTORY OF THE COMMON CORE STANDARDS

The Common Core Standards (the Internet version is available at <http://www.corestandards.org/>; a downloadable version is available at <http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards>) is an initiative between the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices (NGA) and the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) that has been adopted by 37 states at the time of this writing. Teacher-librarians should check the status of these standards in their individual states and districts to try to get a seat at the table for planning, implementation, and assessment of progress. Such a watchful eye will notice monies streaming from both state and federal programs that can be channeled to the initiatives of the learning commons/library program. Watch in particular for funding targeted at President Obama's Race to the Top initiative.

The CCS were developed in 2009 and completed early in 2010. While input was solicited several times from educators and in several different ways, they were built with political input as well. Though every state and many national associations have their own sets of academic standards, these were built with the understanding that they would be overarching and unify the expectations of student learning across the United States.

To date, over two-thirds of the states in the United States have adopted these standards for their public school systems. Their intent is for them to be implemented at the state level, but be coordinated and evaluated at the national level. The expectation of these standards is to create a focused and coherent set of standards that will cross all state boundaries in the United States and be a set of rigorous expectations that a student will be able to find at any school he or she attends. It is for this reason that the CCS will always take precedence over any other set of standards known presently. This does not mean the "other" sets of standards are not important. What matters is to figure out how they fit together. Teacher-librarians are the most well-equipped to do just this.

Being conversant on the CCS and other sets of standards is a central role teacher-librarians can have. The CCS are mostly centered on language arts and mathematics, but push the ideas for language arts into



social studies and science as an attempt to have everyone in the school concentrating on foundational literacy. For teacher-librarians, most of the opportunities to make a difference come in the language arts standards with their emphasis on reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language. The emphasis of the entire initiative is to prepare children and teens for college and a career (the workforce).

The standards are based on ideas about college and career readiness as well as articulation between K-12 and higher education issues. They work on preparing students in the United States to compete globally. The ideas for these standards often came from the understandings of best standards in the field of education, but with the focus of being centered on preparing students for global competition.

While nothing replaces an individual reading and study of the standards and their accompanying documents, we would like to comment on some of the major ideas in the standards that affect the role and mission of the learning commons program.

There are three main sections in the CCS—K-5, 6-12 Language Arts, and 6-12 Literacy in History, Social Studies, Science, and Math. The Common Core Standards see use of these standards as being a shared responsibility between the school and others with an education interest. The CCS offer appendices with examples of lessons, term glossaries, and examples with comments about student writing.

The shared responsibility is the focus and the CCS are designed to constructively develop skills and learning in ways that advance a student's understanding of their education.

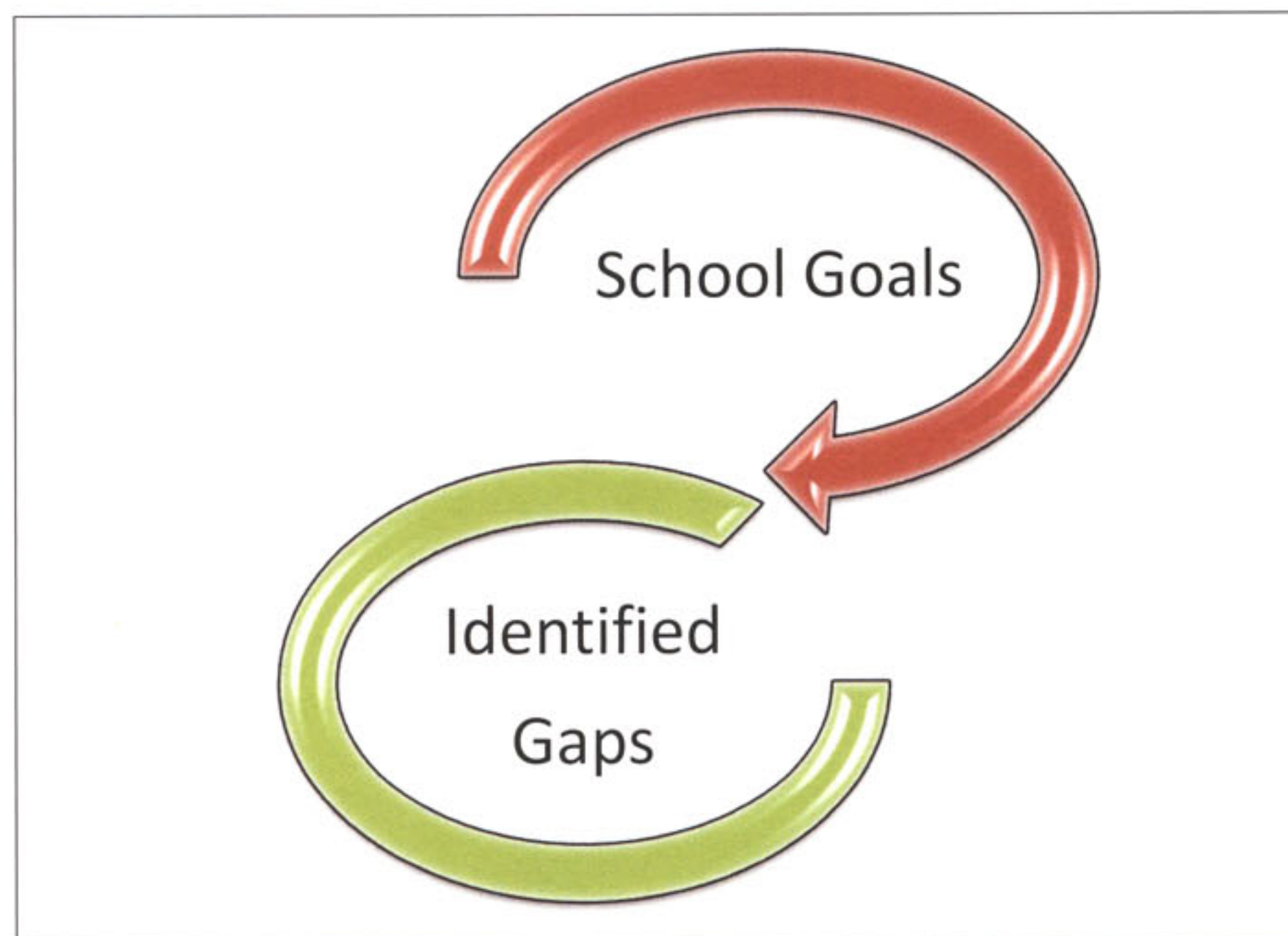
Finding one's way around these standards in addition to the maze of other standards documents is hard to do. We offer this chart as a way to consider using them with your already full standards consideration at your school:

Step 1: Build deep understanding of the various standards documents and their vision for excellence.

Step 2: Study the individual school's goals, mission, and initiatives and do a gap analysis.



**Figure 1**



**Figure 2**

Step 3: Plan an initiative that will address the gaps combining the local and national visions.

Step 4: Implement and assess the results as a basis for moving forward.

### THE CENTRAL IDEAS OF THE COMMON CORE STANDARDS

- Reading – a balance between fiction and informational texts and the role of complex texts

Of major interest to teacher-librarians are three major ideas that inform our practice: reading widely, reading much more informational texts, and reading complex texts.

Reading Widely: The standards are quite clear:

*To build a foundation for college and career readiness, students must read widely and deeply from among a broad range of high-quality, increasingly chal-*





## JUNIOR FICTION

**Death in the air [Bk. 2].** Shane Peacock. Tundra Books, 2008. \$9.95. 978-0-88776-928-3. Grades 4-7. Sherlock's attempts to solve the death of a well-known aerialist and the robbery of the Crystal Palace vault put him at odds with ruthless criminals, a band of youthful thieves, and Scotland Yard, as well as threatening his friendship with Irene Doyle.

**Eye of the crow [Bk. 1].** Shane Peacock. Tundra Books, 2009. \$9.95. 978-0-88776-919-1. Grades 4-7. Thirteen-year-old Sherlock's dabbling at solving a crime leads to his mother's ruthless murder and Irene Doyle's serious injuries. Now he must bury his emotions and use his wits and physical skills to help solve the crime—before they decide he did it!

**The secret fiend [Bk. 4].** Shane Peacock. Tundra Books, 2010. \$19.95. 978-0-88776-853-8. Grades 4-7. While a costumed creature called Spring Heeled Jack terrorizes the poorer sections of London, Sherlock's bitterest enemy (the criminal chief who calls himself Malefactor) is hunting him to the death. Are the two problems related? And is Irene getting dangerously involved with Malefactor?

**Vanishing girl [Bk. 3].** Shane Peacock. Tundra Books, 2009. \$19.95. 978-0-88776-852-1. Grades 4-7. When a wealthy young society girl is kidnapped, rescued, and then kidnapped again, all of London is in an uproar, especially her father, whose uncompromising views on criminal punishment are well known. Holmes needs to find her to show up at Scotland Yard, while avoiding a deadly enemy. Will his mental and physical abilities be enough?



Figure 3



Figure 4

lenging literary and informational texts. Through extensive reading of stories, dramas, poems, and myths from diverse cultures and different time periods, students gain literary and cultural knowledge as well as familiarity with various text structures and elements. By reading texts in history/social studies, science, and other disciplines, students build a foundation of knowledge in these fields that will also give them the background to be better readers in all content areas. Students can only gain this foundation when the curriculum is intentionally and coherently structured to develop rich content knowledge within and across grades. Students also acquire the habits of reading independently and closely, which are essential to their future success. (print doc, p. 10)

Reading widely assumes a large collection of resources in every format imaginable from print to digital and on a wide variety of devices owned or circulated to students or available at a student's elbow whether in the learning commons, the classroom, at home, or wherever students hang out and certainly 24/7. These standards align with the NAEP reading framework, but the Stephen Krashen message of access, access, access is still the best idea for elevating foundational literacy.

**Informational Texts:** For teacher-librarians who have spent a career encouraging the reading of fiction, the standards call for a significant shift of emphasis: "The standards emphasize the reading of informational and complex texts in addition to literature. The document agrees with the NAEP balance between narrative





### Distribution of Literary and Informational Passages by Grade in the 2009 NAEP Reading Framework

Grade	Literary	Informational
4	50%	50%
8	45%	55%
12	30%	70%

Source: National Assessment Governing Board. (2008). *Reading framework for the 2009 National Assessment of Educational Progress*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Figure 5

and nonfictional text as follows:" (print doc introduction, p. 5)

If teacher-librarians think about the entire body of texts students are consuming during a typical week, then we would think of the balance between fiction and nonfiction read from all sources: books, Internet, textbooks, newspapers, and more, on any device, and at any time day or night. Such an investigation in the school might ask what the teacher-librarian is promoting and circulating either in text or digital formats.

In a recent report from Renaissance Learning (<http://doc.renlearn.com/KM-Net/R004101202GH426A.pdf>) the top 40 titles of the million books read by "Accelerated Readers" were presented across a number of various blocks of schools and from all grade levels. Looking at the lists of books that young people read and are most often tested on, two types of titles appear: pop series fiction usually below grade level challenge and in the upper grades, books assigned by English teachers such as *The Outsiders*, *Grapes of Wrath*, and other popular classics. No nonfiction/informational books made the top 40 on any of the lists. Traditionally, teacher-librarians have promoted the love of reading through great children's and YA fiction. Now the challenge of pushing more informational reading comes at a time when there is more wonderful informational texts targeted at children and teens than at any time in the history of the world. Certainly teacher-librarians can shift gears to embrace and promote the best-of-the-best biography, science, history, and art, among other topics that kids and teens are genuinely interested in. Perhaps teacher-librarians could celebrate more informational book authors at their banquets or author visits and give

more attention to the periodical literature aimed information book authors.

**Complex Texts.** What are complex texts? These are the texts that make you think, linger over, chew, read between the lines, and analyze. They are read slowly: read a passage, think, think, think, enjoy, and grow intellectually.

As the standards urge:

*...all students must be able to comprehend texts of steadily increasing complexity as they progress through school. By the time they complete the core, students must be able to read and comprehend independently and proficiently the kinds of complex texts commonly found in college and careers. In brief, while reading demands in college, workforce training programs, and life in general have held steady or increased over the last half century, K-12 texts have actually declined in sophistication, and relatively little attention has been paid to students' ability to read complex texts independently. These conditions have left a serious gap between many high school seniors' reading ability and the reading requirements they will face after graduation. (Appendix A, p. 2)*

The standards provide extensive guidance in how to select various types of complex texts in Appendix A. Here is where teacher-librarians can shine as they help teachers select wide-ranging passages and whole literature, original documents, essays, or treatises by great writers. Those who are tied to lexile levels will want to make this section of the standards a major focus of study. Technology can assist struggling readings to enjoy the benefits

## YA FICTION

### BREAKING LAWS

**Borderline.** Allan Stratton. Harper, 2010. \$16.99. 978-0-06-145111-9.

Grades 7-11. Sami does not get along with his traditional, Muslim father but when his father is arrested as a terrorist, Sami sets out to clear his name, even if it entails crossing a border illegally.

**Flash.** Michael Cadnum. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010. \$17.99. 978-0-374-39911-5. Grades 8-11. In this fast-paced novel, when two older teen brothers decide to rob a bank, the effects on their future and their California neighborhood prove deadly.

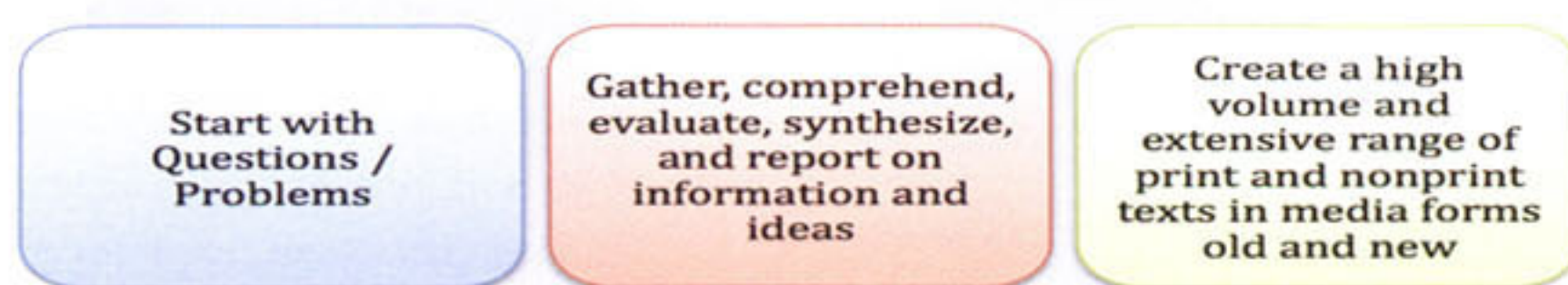
**Girl, stolen.** April Henry. Henry Holt, 2010. \$16.99. 978-0-8050-9005-5.

Grades 7-10. Griffin just means to steal a car but he ends up with Cheyenne, the blind daughter of a wealthy businessman, who was lying quiet and sick in the backseat. Has he made a terrible mistake or could this be his big chance?

**You.** Charles Benoit. Harper, 2010. \$16.99. 978-0-06-194704-9. Grades 8-12. Told in the second person, this suspenseful narrative gets into the mind of Kyle, a slacker with regrets about the choices he has made so far in life. When a slick new boy at school befriends him, Kyle does not foresee the tragedy that readers encounter in the opening pages.



# Research Process from CCR introduction:



**Figure 6**

of complex tests. For example, one might hover over a word in a passage from Shakespeare and get a definition, an explanatory passage, a tour of the idea or place being discussed. One such free Web 2.0 tool is "Scribd."

- Research – the research process embedded in the CCS

In the writing section of the standards, teacher-librarians can plainly see the central role that research and writing are emphasized and a topic that has been elevated and stressed as never before.

Over the last decade, teachers have often abandoned the need for students to do research, problem-based learning, or project-based learning because they were focused on teaching the content knowledge required to "pass the test." However, the CCS recognizes that investigation by students is a critical element of not only language arts, but also of science, social studies, and even math (see...in the math standards). Since teacher-librarians are very interested in the research process, we read through the CCS very carefully and constructed the following research process model from the descriptive text.

In an additional statement, the standards discuss research as follows:

*To be ready for college, workforce training, and life in a technological society, students need the ability to gather, comprehend, evaluate, synthesize, and report on information and ideas, to conduct original research in order to answer questions or solve problems, and to analyze and create a high volume and ex-*

*tensive range of print and nonprint texts in media forms old and new. The need to conduct research and to produce and consume media is embedded into every aspect of today's curriculum. In like fashion, research and media skills and understandings are embedded throughout the Standards rather than treated in a separate section. (print doc introduction, p. 4)*

The above model and statement are compatible with a wide variety of information literacy models considered essential by teacher-librarians', however, it does lack a

thread of formative assessment along the way and a Big Think (Loertscher & Koechlin, 2009), at the end so useful in building metacognition skills with learners.

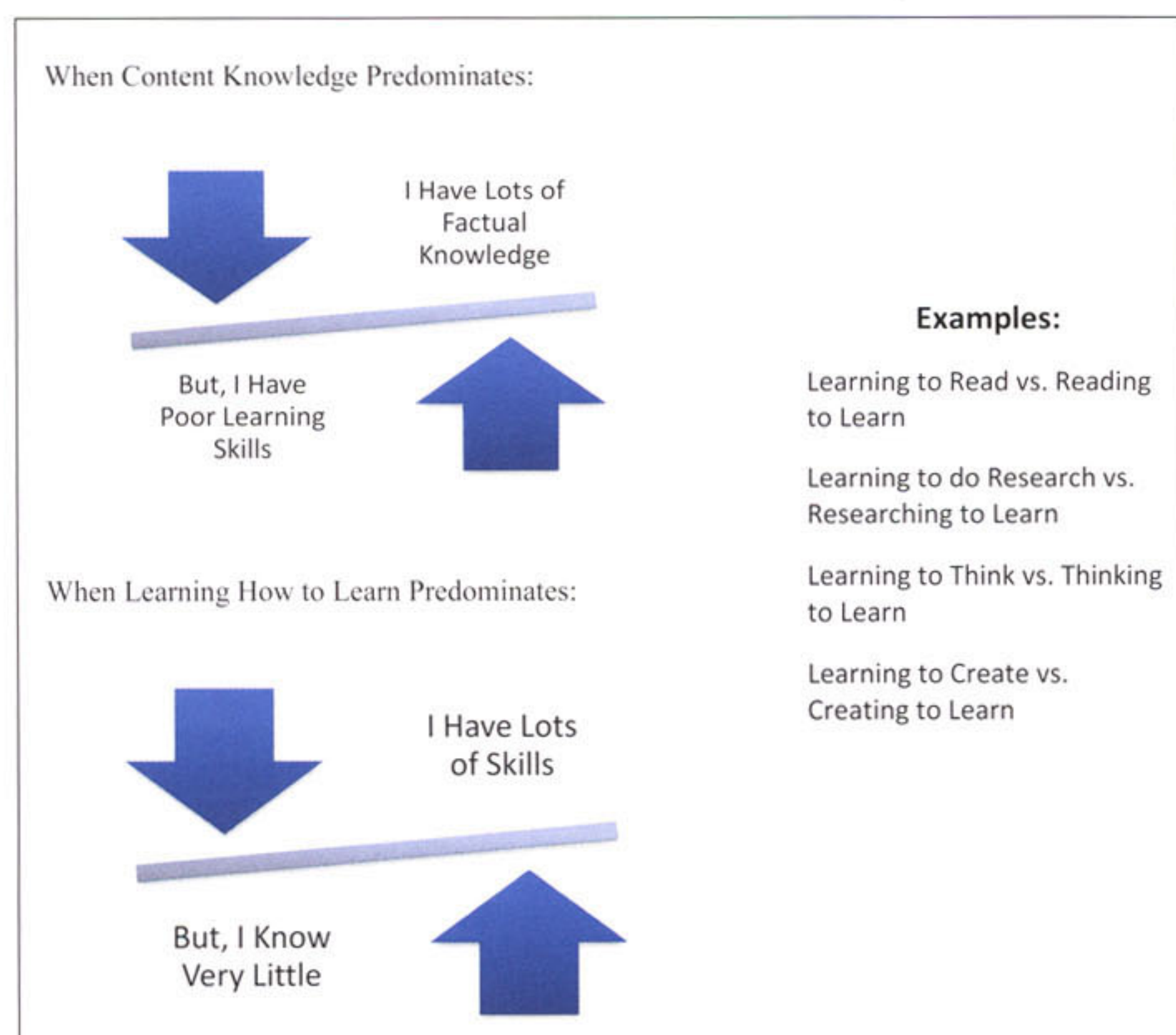
In the CCS language arts standards introduction, the following list of characteristics of learner as researchers appears:

- They demonstrate independence;
- They build strong content knowledge;
- They respond to the varying demands of audience, task, purpose and discipline;
- They comprehend as well as critique;
- They value evidence;
- They use technology and digital media strategically and capably;
- They come to understand other perspectives and cultures.

While teacher-librarians could certainly add to the list, this set is a good foundation.

## THE BATTLE BETWEEN CONTENT AND PROCESS: INDEPENDENT, COOPERATIVE, OR COLLABORATIVE?

As the Common Core Standards are brought into operation, the old conflict arises again between those who feel content is more



**Figure 7**





## ACCIDENTS

**The rest of her life.** Laura Moriarty. Hyperion, 2007. \$14.95. 978-1-401-30943-5. Grades 9-12. When eighteen-year-old Kara Churchill runs over and kills classmate Bethany Cleese, both families suffer, sometimes in unexpected ways. Realistic and affecting, this novel offers insight into both grief and mother-daughter relationships.

**The secret between us.** Barbara Delinsky. Doubleday, 2008. \$25.95. 978-0-385-51868-0. Grades 9-12. Teenager Grace Monroe is driving her mother, Dr. Deborah Monroe, home on a rainy night and causes an accident. When the mother says it was she who had been driving, there are repercussions for the family, especially guilt-ridden Grace.

**The story sisters.** Alice Hoffman. Random House, 2009. \$25.00. 978-0-307-39386-9. Grades 9-12. Hoffman tells the tale of Elv, Claire, and Meg, three sisters touched by fate, magic, and tragedy. Haunting and sad, this mesmerizing story looks at what happens when one family member accidentally generates heartbreak.

**The best of times.** Penny Vincenzi. Doubleday, 2009. \$26.00. 978-0-385-52824-5. Grades 11-12. On a busy London highway, a truck causes a multiple vehicle wreck, which affects many people. Interesting characters of various ages and their intertwining lives keep the reader turning the pages to see how everything turns out.

**Blame.** Michelle Huneven. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2009. \$25.00. 978-0-374-11430-5. Grades 11-12. Young history professor Patsy MacLemoore comes to be in jail after a drinking binge and learns she ran down and killed a mother and daughter. Or did she? This novel deftly explores guilt, forgiveness, redemption, and the consequences of drunk driving.

When Content Learning and Learning How to Learn Are in Balance:

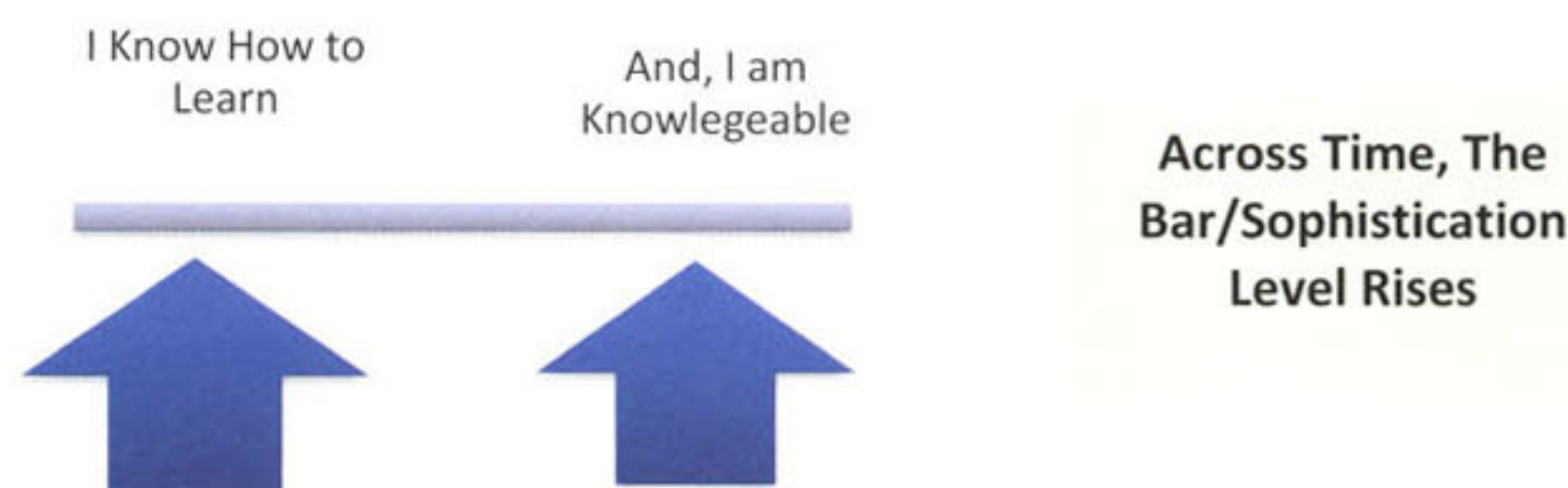


Figure 8

important and those who believe in learning how to learn skills. For example, the Common Core Curriculum Mapping Project (<http://www.commoncore.org/>) partially funded by the Gates Foundation argues against the teaching of 21st Century Skills as promoted by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills. In Figure 7 we illustrate the results when one is taught almost to the exclusion of the other.

We would argue that it is fruitless to argue one position over the other; thus this point of view that content learning and learning how to learn must be in balance.

An example might illustrate the point here. Suppose a language arts teacher wants to teach a research paper every year. Often the teacher will say, "Pick a topic that interests you and we will spend our time focusing on how to learn to research your topic." Such an assignment is an open door to plagiarism since students can readily find papers on almost any topic pre-written on the Internet complete with note cards, sources, and citations. If, however, the English teacher were to work with the social studies teacher who is likely to be more interested in topics than in research skills, a topic such as colonization or a current controversial issue could be selected as the "umbrella topic" under which students would research various aspects of the overall topic. The advantage here is that in the same amount of time, the learners can develop deep understanding about the topic at hand in addition to learning the research paper skills. We kill two birds with one stone and push a central agenda of the CCS at the same time.

The same example combining reading skills with content knowledge would apply. Instead of trying to build reading skills with random and contrived passages, the same skills could be taught as we explored various animals together. The class is learning to read as they read to learn about the animals they love. Suddenly a large library of texts about animals at varying reading levels becomes central and the reading textbook supplemental.

- Speaking and Listening

One of the dangers in interpreting the speaking and listening standards section is that the tired and worn oral presentation will continue to be a passive activity that consumes a great deal of time. Of course, students need to learn how to present in front of an audience and listen actively while others present, but thanks to technology and creativity, there are many new ways teacher-librarians can recommend and implement to help every student become a fluent presenter. There are an increasing number of Web 2.0 tools that come to mind such as Animoto, Voki, podcasting, videotaping (short YouTube style or Ted Talk style), recorded narrations for PowerPoint or Google Presentations, and the popularization of digital storytelling. The idea of a one to 35 presentation can be replaced by partner sharing, small group to small group, sampling of videos as one would the playing of YouTube videos, and the use of backchannel commons by all listeners during presentations. These are just a few of the exciting new possibilities to develop speaking and listening while cutting time and boredom.



- Language

The intent of the standards is to have every student develop a mastery of good English language skills. This is the section targeted at English Language Learners but really all learners who may come to school with various nonstandard language practices from their culture or environment.

Stephen Krashen has clearly given teacher-librarians the solution to building formal English. Encourage and provide access to tons and tons of books and other reading materials filled with standard English. The more one reads, the more powerful the effect of vocabulary, spelling, grammar, comprehension, and fluency, just to name a few. This would be true of students who are learning a foreign language: The more I read in a language, the more I master that language. And, with the encouragement of the CCS to increase informational texts, more nonfiction reading will contribute heavily to formal English or other language proficiency.

- Technology—the role technology plays in the CCS

In the Internet version of the CCS, the following statement addressing technology is made:

*They use technology and digital media strategically and capably.*

*Students employ technology thoughtfully to enhance their reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language use. They tailor their searches online to acquire useful information efficiently, and they integrate what they learn using technology with what they learn offline. They are familiar with the strengths and limitations of various technological tools and mediums and can select and use those best suited to their communication goals. (Internet doc, introduction)*

Thus, like the embedded research skills above, technology is presumed to affect learning experiences in general. However, most of the references to technology in the CCS grade level standards mention technology as an avenue for presentation of what was learned. Lest more death by

PowerPoint be presumed by the reader of the standards, there are regular mentions of creations that take many forms.

If one reads the statement from the standards about technology carefully, there is encouragement to use technology as an actual learning tool: the idea that Web 2.0 tools can actually stimulate thinking, deep understanding, mastery of concepts and ideas, or the creation of collaborative intelligence.

Teacher-librarians are finding a major niche in the collaborative creation of learning experiences when they demonstrate the power of technology to boost actual learning rather than just a presentation mechanism. When IT directors realize the power of Web 2.0 learning tools, it is one thing to open them up to the students but quite another to demonstrate their impact on teaching and learning. For example, utilizing the power of collaborative writing in a Google Document opens a whole new world of involving every learner, building editing skills, collaborative idea development, and producing effective arguments stressed so much in the CCS.

## IMPLICATIONS OF THE STANDARDS FOR CREATING AND TRANSFORMING TO A LEARNING COMMONS

The ideas from the book about the learning commons by Loertscher, Koechlin, Zwaan (2008), *The New Learning Commons: Where Learners Win*, focus on the school library being the central area for learning. That is moving beyond the concept of the school library as a centralized collection where knowledge is research, stored, circulated, and managed to one where knowledge is acquired, invited, and embraced with its support. It has helped to close the gap between what is known and what is to become known—just as the standards attempt to do this very thing in education today. Just as the learning commons places a spotlight on environment, access, assistance, and technology, not to mention assistance, creativity, contribution, and activities, the CCS work to alter the ways of “doing” education and make it

more relational and competitive to world expectations. From high-tech to low-tech, these standards work on rigor with cause, learning with enthusiasm. But none of this will happen if there is not a strong interface between them and what is happening at the school. The learning commons concept can model this interface.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

The CCS are to be embraced and understood. There are fewer of them, they aim highly, and they strive for evidence-based feedback. They focus on key topics at each grade level and have a coherent articulation across the grades. They work to balance concepts and skills, content, and process. Information fluency is a key component. Teacher-librarians certainly as a body tend to use standards effectively and often are the ones that best understand them.

All the standards do not equate to curriculum. That is why understanding the Common Core Standards and all other sets of standards within the context of your school and your students is key to this process. The standards help us focus toward 21st century expectations for our students. They work to help us set forward-thinking goals about student performance, based not on speculation but evidence.

Does this raise the expectation bar? Maybe—it certainly put concrete to ideas about how to better teach and more successfully learn. The CCS standards have assumed a place at the table. Will we join them?

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